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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 002813

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SUBJECT: IS KADIMA ABOUT TO SPLIT?

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Classified By: A/DCM Marc Sievers, reasons 1.4 (b),(d)

11. (C) Summary: The Israeli media is reporting extensively on efforts by PM Netanyahu to split the opposition Kadima party, which currently has one more seat in the Knesset than Netanyahu's Likud. Dissatisfaction with Tzipi Livni's leadership of Kadima has been an open secret for some time, but appears to be coming to a head. Livni's main rival within the party, former Deputy Prime Minister and former Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, favors Kadima joining the coalition, but so far appears inclined to challenge Livni for the party's leadership rather than split the party. Netanyahu, who has sought a broad, national unity government since the elections, stands to gain a lot from any defection of Kadima members to his coalition. End summary.

12. (SBU) Speculation has run rampant in the Israeli media regarding attempts by PM Netanyahu and his Likud party to splinter seven members away from the Kadima party. Per reftel, under the "Mofaz law" passed last fall, a faction is allowed to split from its mother party if it takes with it seven seats. Israel press reported widely December 24 that the Prime Minister's Office had contacted Knesset House Committee Chairman Yariv Levin (Likud) on December 23 to prepare the Knesset for a possible debate and vote next week regarding the splitting of a faction from Kadima.

13. (SBU) According to Israeli press, PM Netanyahu, senior PM Office officials, and members of Likud have consulted over the past several months with at least 14 Kadima Knesset members who have reportedly expressed interest in leaving Kadima. Israeli newspaper Ma'ariv reported potential Kadima defectors have been offered various minister and deputy minister positions, as well as the chairmanship of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee. Ma'ariv also reported that Defense Minister Barak and Foreign Minister Lieberman have engaged over the past few days with potential Kadima defectors.

14. (SBU) Israeli media outlets have identified seven Kadima members -- Otniel Schneller, Yulia Shamalov-Berkovich, Aryeh Bibi, Ronit Tirosh, Shai Hermesh, Eli Aflalo and possibly Ze'ev Boim -- as having potentially decided to leave Kadima. Israel Radio reported December 24 that seven Kadima members had opted to leave the party, but a Likud party source said the move was being delayed in the hopes that more Kadima members will decide to defect. Channel One reported December 23 that six Kadima members had initialed an agreement last week with Netanyahu's advisor Yitzhak Molho to leave the party. Aflalo officially announced December 23 that he intended to leave Kadima -- if six other Kadima members decided not to join him, Aflalo said he would form a one-man faction. Channel One quoted Aflalo as stating that he had lost faith in opposition leader and Kadima party leader Tzipi Livni, who had taken Kadima "too far to the left."

15. (C) Dissatisfaction with Livni's leadership of Kadima has been an open secret for some time. A well-connected

political consultant recently described to PolCouns a phone conversation initiated by Kadima MK and former Minister of Finance Ronni Baron. Baron asked the consultant whether he thought Livni had what it takes to become prime minister. When the consultant replied that he did not, Baron reportedly said, "I don't think she does either," and hung up. Kadima MK Schneller, a Mofaz supporter who served as former PM Olmert's informal channel to the settler leadership, told PolCouns that he has held regular meetings with Netanyahu as part of an effort to bring parts of Kadima into the coalition. Schneller described his goal as strengthening Netanyahu's hand with the Palestinians, including a possible Knesset declaration of negotiating principles (septel). Schneller said he was trying to broker a meeting between Netanyahu and Mofaz to discuss Mofaz's plan of establishing a Palestinian state with temporary borders, adding that if such a meeting took place, it could lead Mofaz to decide to lead a faction of Kadima into the coalition.

¶6. (SBU) According to Israeli newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth, both Livni and Kadima number two Shaul Mofaz met with the potential Kadima defectors on December 23, imploring them to remain with Kadima. According to Yedioth, Mofaz, who has openly contested Livni for Kadima party leadership, voiced criticism of Livni's conduct and decision to remain in the opposition but asked the potential defectors to instead support his quest to lead the party. Meanwhile, Livni criticized Netanyahu during a speech at the Knesset on December 23 for conducting negotiations to divide Kadima while deliberations continue over the return of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in exchange for the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners. Kadima MK Yoel Hasson contacted

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the attorney general on December 23, asking if Netanyahu's government appointment promises to Kadima defectors constitute bribery. The Kadima party council is expected to convene December 24; Israeli press expects a contentious meeting in which potential defectors may push Livni to join the Netanyahu government.

¶7. (C) Comment: While it is too early to write the obituary of Kadima, which was formed from Likud by Ariel Sharon in order to push through the Gaza disengagement, Livni's leadership of the party is under pressure and it is entirely possible that at least seven members will form their own faction. Mofaz for now appears determined to seize control of the party from Livni rather than split it, but Mofaz has long been on record as supporting Kadima joining the coalition. Netanyahu tried from the outset to form a national unity government including both Labor and Kadima, but has been thwarted so far by Livni's refusal to join him. Netanyahu has a lot at stake in adding more centrist members to his right-leaning coalition, and will likely continue to use all the means at his disposal to woo as many members of Kadima as possible to join him.

CUNNINGHAM